

County Council OKs Verizon cable TV deal

■ 75,000 customers will receive service by the end of the year, company says

BY JANEL DAVIS
STAFF WRITER

The County Council unanimously approved a franchise agreement with Verizon Communications on Tuesday to provide cable television service to county homes and businesses using its underground fiber-optic lines. Service will be rolled out to parts of the county in four phases, beginning with about 75,000 homes in the initial service area by the end of the year.

The company also agreed to provide service to Poolesville-area residents within three years of signing up 75,000 subscribers. The upcounty area was originally scheduled to receive service only when the extended service area — which also includes the Agricultural Reserve — reached 6,000 households. Residents and Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, who represents the area, were concerned because it was unlikely that the area could ever meet that requirement.

Verizon will pay the county an annual franchise fee of 5 percent of its gross revenues from its cable TV service.

"The big winners today will be

our constituents who will finally have a choice of cable provider," said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg.

Under Verizon's plan, Bethesda, Potomac, Germantown, Damascus and Wheaton would receive the service first — within one to three years after the agreement is approved. Other areas, including Silver Spring, Rockville and Takoma Park, would receive service within three to five years; the Gaithersburg area within five to seven years.

The vote follows months of contentious discussions between the council and Verizon over requirements in the 15-year agreement and its compatibility with similar agreements the county has with Comcast and RCN. The level of contention, which resulted in a lawsuit and mandated mediation between the county and Verizon, has not existed in counties such as Howard and Anne Arundel which have approved similar agreements with the company. Prince George's is slated to approve one soon.

"Every franchising authority is different. We work through the requirements of each authority individually," William R. Roberts, president of Verizon Maryland, said about the company's struggles with Montgomery County.

Before the vote, Councilman Steven A. Silverman questioned the Verizon agreement, which requires the company to provide free service to 127 public buildings, such as com-

TO LEARN MORE

Residents interested in Verizon's new FiOS cable television service should:

- Visit www.verizon.com, click on the FiOS link under "What's New" and enter a telephone number to determine when service will be available in their area.
- Once available, service can be ordered by calling Verizon at 888-933-3331 or going to www.verizon.com.
- Installation takes about 14 days for new customers.

munity centers, government buildings and libraries. The company also must contribute \$1 million to the county's cable fund.

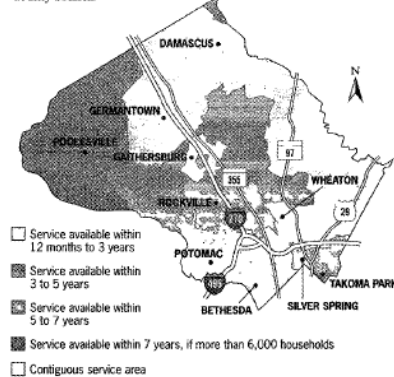
Comcast has maintained that the agreement is unfair to it because it is required to provide free service to an unlimited number of public buildings at the county's request.

"I'm concerned about the disparity for providing free service to community facilities because some of them are completely open-ended, no matter how many requests are made [Comcast] must fulfill them," said Silverman (D-At Large) of Silver Spring. "I'm looking for fairness."

"There is no sweet deal," Roberts said. "You have to look at each agree-

VERIZON'S PLAN TO EXTEND FIOS CABLE SERVICE

Service would be rolled out in phases over seven years if approved by the County Council.



SOURCE: MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL

REUBEN DALKIN/THE GAZETTE

ment in totality. Also, there is no need to duplicate service being provided by another company." Verizon may begin offering the service and rate plans after Council President George I. Leventhal (D-At Large) of Takoma Park signs the agreement later in the week.

"I think the economy will determine the growth rate more than any tinkering with the annual growth policy."

Howard A. Denis

"I think the county is in great hands. [Isiah Leggett and Marilyn Praisner] are two of the steadiest pairs of hands in the county."

Thomas E. Perez

"Unless there is some magic solution . . . we're going to find ourselves stuck in the same traffic congestion that we're stuck in now."

Steven A. Silverman

"I'm frustrated in the fact that we were never able to really get across until now that the achievement gap is not simply a schools problem."

Michael L. Subin